

## “What Not to Miss at Christmas”

### Luke 2:1-19

We have some very prolific readers in our Divinity community who are regulars in our Twiggs-Havel Library. I do miss discussions with Vince Schifano, who for several decades was part of our men’s Saturday morning prayer and breakfast group. While sitting around our corner round table at the Whip, I was mesmerized by Vince quoting from the latest book he’d read in the previous week.

But even the most prolific readers and those of you who spend hours skimming information off the internet, can never come close to absorbing all that’s out there. Because we can only read and see and experience just a tiny bit of what’s out there, everyone of us will die having missed almost everything.

The good news, though, is that even if we miss almost everything, we can still catch the most important things that we should never miss – like the really good news of Christmas.

Whether we’re lifelong churchgoers or C and E worshippers or holiday visitors or downright atheists, most us already believe we have a pretty good idea of what shouldn’t be missed at Christmas.

For many people, the one thing you don't want to miss at Christmas is **family**. Getting the extended family together, remembering times and loved ones past, sharing a meal around the table, opening presents under the tree -- that's what Christmas is all about. In our increasingly nomadic culture, where extended families stretch all over the country and even the world, family is certainly a good thing that many don't want to miss.

Ask a kid and those **presents** are likely the things they don't want to miss at Christmas.

What would Christmas be without presents? Sure, the tree is nice and all, but come on!

For many others, even those who aren't Christians, it's the "**feeling**" of Christmas that really matters. Lots of folks who have never set foot in a church still set up a tree, put together a shopping list, maybe even sing a few carols. The "Spirit of Christmas" may be just about any spirit at all, but it doesn't really matter as long as there's some sense of happiness during the season.

In a few moments we listen to the Christmas story in Luke 2 and all of those expectations are there: The holy family huddles together in a stable. Later the Magi bring gifts to the child Jesus and the Spirit of God is behind both stories making things happen.

Tonight I humbly offer another "don't-miss-this" proposition for this particular Christmas -- something that most people would seem to be missing in a world where jobs are scarce, where violence and terrorism light up our TV screens, where disease and death are at the forefront in the minds of many of us folks gathered here tonight. This year one important phrase seems to jump out more than the others, even if we've read it a thousand times:

"Do not be afraid."

Luke uses this phrase three times in the first two chapters, each time spoken by the angel Gabriel. It functions as a kind of thesis statement for the story that will follow: the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It's because of the newborn King that the people of Israel -- and we, too -- need no longer be afraid.

We don't want to miss out on *family*, or *presents* or the "*feeling*." *But Christmas is an opportunity not to miss out on being unafraid.*

The first time Gabriel appears is to the old priest Zechariah, whom Luke uses as a kind of link to the Old Testament and the temple system. The angel says to the old man, "Do not be afraid because your prayers have been answered" (Luke 1:13). They were going to be answered in a personal sense because Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were going to have a son who would become John the Baptist, but also answered in the larger sense that God was going to do something about the plight of his people, who had lived under the specter of fear and oppression for generations.

Wouldn't we all like to hear that our prayers have been answered? We'd like for God to send Gabriel to tell us that our business is going to be prosperous again, that the pain of our grief will subside, that a cure will be found for us before it's too late. We sure wouldn't want to miss that message!

But God's way of answering our prayers is often by doing something beyond our hopes and expectations. Yes, sometimes our prayers are answered in ways that we want, but more often we see God at work in giving us what we really need when we need it. In Israel's case, God's Messiah comes as a tiny, helpless baby instead of a conquering hero. Instead of taking on the Roman oppressors with military might, he would suffer and die at the hands of the Empire. This is how God chooses to save the whole world -- by participating in human suffering and taking it on, not by bailing himself, or us, out of it. Our prayers are always answered by the God who walks beside us no matter where we find ourselves.

The second time Gabriel shows up, it's in a visit to Mary. "Do not be afraid," he says to her, "for you have found favor with God" (1:30). It wasn't that Mary was especially wonderful or perfect. God chooses her because God chooses to favor the unlikely, the obscure, the

innocent and even the mistake-prone to do his most important work. Like Zechariah, like so many others in Scripture, Mary is offered an opportunity. She will be blessed in bringing God into the world, but, as always seems to be the case, that blessing would cost her something, too. As Simeon will tell her when she brings Jesus to be dedicated in the temple -- "a sword will pierce your own soul, too" (Luke 2:35). She no doubt remembered those words when she saw her son, God's Son, hanging on a Roman cross.

Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God. That's the second message we don't want to miss at Christmas. God favors each of us, loves us with an everlasting love, loves us enough to come as one of us, die for us, live with us and in us. It's not favor that we earn. Instead, it is the ultimate gift -- better than all the presents under the tree. We call that gift "grace," and God offers it to us lavishly. God doesn't promise us a pain-free life (he didn't endure one himself in the person of Jesus) but he does promise to be with us every step of the way.

The third angel announcement takes place out there in the fields beyond Bethlehem. Shepherds, who are the poorest of the poor, are watching over their flocks when the angel appears and, as the King James Bible says, they were "sore afraid." "Do not be afraid," says the angel a third time, "for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10).

Notice the angel song: Glory to God in heaven and on earth peace. Peace. Not despair, not fear. It is good news for all the people -- not just for some.

And the little drummer boy, the young shepherd that was too poor to bring a gift to the Christ-child, brings the gift of music, giving praise to God.

Jesus would grow up to preach that the kingdom of God is at hand. It's a present reality of which we see glimpses, but also a future promise. The kingdom will be fully realized in that second Advent, when Jesus claims the throne once and for all. This is the grounds for hope on Christmas -- that no matter what happens in the present, in Christ, God promises to set the world right once and for all.

In the meantime we hear the angel voice: "Do not be afraid." Money will come and go, yet still God is with us. Our health may fail, yet still God is with us. Our lives may be broken by sin and our past mistakes. But still God is with us.

That is the good news for all of us, the thing you don't want to miss no matter how many times you've read it. Our failures are not final, our infirmities are not ultimately fatal, and our death will not be the last word.

All the books ever written, all the movies ever made, never will amount to the can't-miss truth of this story. You get this good news, and nothing else really matters.

Let's not miss out on the opportunity to be unafraid! "Do not be afraid, for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

Please rise for the good news of Christmas . . .

Luke 2:1-19:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

<sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went

to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to

Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and

family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" <sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

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